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AUTHOR Tichenor, Stuart
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ABSTRACT

Generally, students in vocational and technical colleges are in writing classes because they must be, not because they want to be. As a rule, students in basic composition classes have been more or less continually exposed to writing classes since middle school where they been asked to keep journals, read articles and short stories, and write essays over topics they consider uninteresting. As a means of addressing their vocational interests, two assignments were developed: the fact-finding assignment and the mini-business plan. For the fact-finding assignment, students are to find out what types of writing they will be expected to do for their degree and for the companies that they will end up working for. Organization is fairly simple but effective; computers are the writing tool. Students write under five basic headings: introduction, writing at school, writing at work, discussion (in which students make suggestion for improving the writing course), and conclusion. For the mini-business plan assignment, students are required to show how they would set up their own business. They are not to become involved in the legalistic or financial side of things, as the instructor has no expertise in these areas; rather they are to write a statement of purpose, a company description, a discussion of location, products and services, a plan to market products and services, and an estimation of the number of employees needed. (TB)

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Relevance in Basic Composition: Writing Assignments for Technical Students

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Presented by:
Stuart Tichenor
General Education Department
Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee

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Relevance in Basic Composition

One of the first things I discovered when teaching basic composition to technical students was that they do not like to do two things: read and write. Consequently, the students who enroll in basic composition classes are not there because they are motivated. They enroll because they have to be there as part of a technical or vocational degree program. As a result, one of the most frequent comments I hear is, "I don't need to know how to do this (write) to twist bolts." That sort of attitude was responsible for the changes that took place in the way I teach my basic writing classes; it also requires me to question each class so I can know what they believe to be relevant to them and try to work that relevance into writing assignments that have some meaning.

Background Information

As a rule, students in my basic composition classes have been more or less continually exposed to writing classes since middle school which asked them to keep journals, read articles and short stories, and write essays over somewhat abstract ideas or topics which did not interest them. In addition, they were also habitually exposed to grammar taught in isolation, reading exercises, and sentence level exercises which really did not relate to anything they were interested in. Is it any wonder that my writing students could not see any relevance to what they were doing?

About six weeks into the first trimester I taught basic composition, my students balked at what we were doing and complained. One student commented: "We've just been through four years of high school and this kind of stuff, can't we do something that's useful and a little more grown-up?" Upon hearing that, I stopped the class and a lively discussion ensued about what kinds of writing these

students could use. With students studying such diverse fields as Air Conditioning and Refrigeration, Culinary Arts, Automotive Technology, Diesel and Heavy Equipment, Jewelry Technology, and Shoe, Boot, and Saddle, the common factor seemed to be some type of business or technical writing; the other common factor, which was missing, was relevance.

My initial argument to students was that writing skills are transferable. They did not buy into that, however; after some serious consideration, neither did I. While it is possible to teach skills which are transferable, why not teach those same skills in a context which is immediate and relevant to students? Without the relevance, students will continue to be frustrated and often resentful with what they believe is useless repetition and something which does not relate to them or their current studies. Another factor to consider is attendance; since attendance is not used as a punitive measure in grading, students begin to drop out of sight when they get frustrated or bored. When that happens, they do not read the assignments, they do not complete the exercises, they do not do the writing and, sometimes, they do not care if all this means a bad or failing grade.

From those first discussions about relevance and the writing process, which included computer usage, came two major writing assignments: the Fact-Finding Assignment and the Mini-Business Plan. Both of these assignments are aimed at technical students and their desire to understand why they should be in a writing class. As a change from the typical composition assignments, students take their writing more seriously; students who do not take the assignments seriously are usually those who would not take any form of writing assignment seriously. Such negatives aside, I have seen dramatic changes in students' attitudes towards writing.

Fact-Finding Assignment

Since students want relevance, I tell them to inquire within their respective departments about the types of writing they will be required to do in their degree program as well as on the job. They are also to find out what kind of writing they will be expected to do as they move up through the ranks of a company or business.

In order to make the assignment easier for students to write and easier for me to read and evaluate, I give students a handout which shows a technical writing format complete with headings and descriptions of what kind of information is to be included under each heading. Organization is fairly simple, but effective. Then, following the technical writing format, I give students five basic headings to use: Introduction, Writing at School, Writing at Work, Discussion, Conclusion; they may also use bulleted lists to show the types of writing they will need to do at school and work. Although most students prefer to use the headings I give them, I also allow them to modify them if they need to, or write their own headings if they have information which needs to be discussed separately.

One of the most important parts of the assignment falls in the Discussion section. As part of the assignment, I ask students to discuss how they think my writing class is preparing them for what they have discovered about the forms of writing they may need to prepare for. I tell students this is a no holds barred discussion and they are expected to openly and honestly critique how the class is relevant to them and their career goals. If they think the assignments are not relevant or need to be modified, they are to offer suggestions for improvement. This input helps me shape the way the class is taught for the rest of the semester and also helps me plan for future writing assignments. Giving students a voice usually yields useful suggestions for assignments.

In the Conclusion section, I ask students to sum up the types of writing they think they need most, possible assignments, and how changing the class would benefit them and other students in their degree program. Most students have definite ideas about what should be changed, and some students have even suggested different textbooks or made comments about the type of textbook they think would suit them best. All the students who complete this assignment know that they have a better idea about what goes on in their field of study--and even if their programs do not require very much writing, which some do not, they at least get to write about something which is relevant to them.

The Mini-Business Plan

The second major writing assignment is the mini-business plan. This writing assignment requires students to explain how they would set up their own business. I call it "mini" because, as a writing instructor, I do not have the expertise to lecture on the legalities and finances of the business world. Consequently, this downsized version does not go into all the detail that a business plan would for a small business management class. It does, though, force students to use sufficient details, something which is often lacking, to explain themselves. In the mini-business plan, students do not write the Legal Plan or Financial Plan--nor do they write a resume. What they do write, however, follows typical business plan format as described in small business management textbooks; using a technical writing format, students write a statement of purpose, a company description, discussion of location, products and services they provide, how they plan to market their products/services, and how many people will be employed by the business.

As preparation for the business plan assignment, my class attends the small business management class on the day the instructor begins working with his class

on business plans. This introductory information gives my writing students a better background about how important a well written plan can become; hearing it from someone other than an English teacher also makes more of an impression. As an added incentive, students who are enrolled in the basic composition class may use their business plans later in the small business management class; likewise, those students who may be co-enrolled can use the assignment in both classes. Not only does this allow students to get their writing critiqued, it also allows them to have the content of the business plan critiqued by the business teacher for accuracy.

Computer Usage

When I first began teaching basic composition, students did not use the computer labs which were usually reserved for freshman composition and technical writing classes. When I decided to change the way I taught the class, however, I decided that if the students wanted writing which was more relevant and "more grown up," then they should also be using computers to write. At first, several students felt uneasy about this since they had been traditionally considered slow learners. However, as they grew accustomed to the computer room and the idea of word processing, their self-esteem grew and their writing improved dramatically--not unlike what countless other teachers have discovered over years of computer use.

Using computers during class was something that many Basic Composition students did not plan on; at first, they were hesitant. By using an LCD panel and overhead projector hooked up to a computer, however, I was able to help students work their way through the basic word processing program. Once they found that they could successfully use the computers, their self-esteem rose and they took their writing more seriously--certainly more seriously than before. One student

commented that he had always hated writing because he was such a poor speller; but now that he could use the spell-check, he thought his ideas were much easier to put on paper. As a result, I planned extra class time in the computer room and encouraged students to use the computer room in their spare time. As they began using the computer room more often, the quantity and quality of their writing increased considerably. Response to writing assignments was also more enthusiastic than previous assignments which followed a traditional composition focus and were written with pens and paper.

Final Comments

The fact finding assignment and the mini-business plan not only employ information about students' fields (which interests them), but also uses technical writing techniques (e.g., using headings, subheadings, overviews, bulleted lists) they need in order to structure the assignment. Using the technical writing format offers students a form of organization to follow. In addition to the technical writing format, which is new to students, the assignments require students to exhibit what writing skills they already possess by correctly paragraphing their information and using proper sentence structure.

While technical students typically balk at writing traditional composition focused assignments, they get excited about setting themselves up in business. At the very least, they learn that more is involved in going into business than hanging out a shingle. By asking students to focus on the issues involved in setting up a business, they become more realistic about what they have to do; the context of the writing class is a good place to practice. This change of focus in my basic composition classes has given my students a much needed boost in morale; it has also made them feel more self-confident about what they are capable of writing. Even my students who have been diagnosed as learning disabled have been able to

complete these two major writing assignments; I view their completed assignments as a victory for them.

The whole idea behind the changes I made was to make writing relevant to the technical students I deal with every day. Doomsday predictions about how well, or how poorly, students write are easy enough to find--and no wonder. If teachers cannot relate their specialty to students and show them practical applications, how can they expect them to be interested in learning? Relevance in writing assignments can certainly be responsible for changing the way students think and respond to writing; and if that is all it takes, why don't we do it more often?

Copies of the fact-finding and mini-business plan assignment are available from the author.

Stuart Tichenor
General Education Department
Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee
1801 E. 4th
Okmulgee, OK 74447